

PLANNING PROGRAM EVALUATION



ALBEMARLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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INTRODUCTION

In 1964, Albemarle began a comprehensive planning program that has grown and appears healthy with no signs of faltering. To remain strong, however, the program requires an awareness of changes occurring within the planning area and a periodic re-assessment of community goals.

This report is concerned with the planning program in Albemarle since its beginning, the overall effectiveness of the program and, in particular, those reports, studies and ordinances prepared during the past thirteen years.

Each document will be evaluated as to the practicality of its recommendations and to what extent recommendations were acted upon. There will also be attention given to the role of the Albemarle Planning Board and City Council.

REVIEW OF PLANNING EFFECTIVENESS

Since 1964, there have been sixteen printed documents prepared relative to the Albemarle Planning Area (the municipality and its extra-territorial jurisdiction). This number includes four revisions or updates of previously prepared reports. In some cases only the updated versions of these reports will be evaluated. These evaluations will follow chronological order. Land control ordinances will be discussed separately.

RECREATION STUDY - JANUARY 1964

The 1964 Recreation Study forecast a dark picture of Rock Creek Park. Topography and vegetation were thought to be natural barriers to any further development for typical park associated activities. The study merely recommended routine maintenance to keep the park operating at that time. Rock Creek Park has expanded its facilities beyond the expectations of the 1964 study by developing what was thought to be unusable terrain. This expansion has taken place with no additional acquisition of land. The park now provides archery and rifle ranges that are not typically found in much larger cities. The development of the American Round and field archery ranges has spurred local interest in the sport and the development of bowhunting clubs in Stanly County. The rifle range provides a short distance range for all calibres. The field archery range also doubles as a nature trail. Further additions include a rappelling tower, picnic area, jogging trail, paddle tennis courts, tennis court backboards, volley ball and basketball courts. The swimming pool now averages 375 swimmers per day - over the 220 swimmers in 1964.

The park has now reached its full development potential unless more land is purchased southeast and adjacent to the existing park property. This property would facilitate the development of a small lake of approximately seven acres. This would provide additional space for picnic areas, nature trails and canoe activities.

Recommendations were also made in 1964, that the city acquire land to the northeast. Residential development was and still is growing in that area. Unsuccessful efforts were made to secure a tract of land for a park. The reason for the failure to secure the land is further evidence of the need for recreational facilities - the owner decided the land was better suited for residential use. Possibilities still exist as to the acquisition and/or development of land for recreation in this area. The need is still as evident now if not more so than in 1964.

Recommendations were made on specific areas for development into recreational use in different areas of town. As mentioned, the development of a large site on Ridge Road to serve the northeast Albemarle area did not occur.

A 4-6 acre playfield on Smith Street has not been developed. A playfield in South Albemarle on Summit Street has not been developed. A notable accomplishment of one of the recommendations was made when the park was completed on Carolina Avenue. Recommendations for small developments on Fifth and Cannon Streets and Salisbury-Carolina Avenue have not been carried out for reasons of impracticality of one type or another. The study expressed a need for a community building to be developed as soon as possible. The future availability of the National Guard Armory as well as increased evidence that citizens are more inclined to outdoor sports diminishes the possibility of building such a facility. Cooperative agreements between the city and the local schools on the use of school facilities at night and on weekends would also be helpful. As summarized in 1964, the most pressing need in Albemarle regarding recreation is for land. Obviously, the Recreation Study has proven beneficial to Albemarle because the city has seen fit to implement several of its recommendations. There has probably never been a study prepared which had all the recommendations acted upon. However, the accomplishments in Albemarle testify to the amount of emphasis placed on recreation in the city.

POPULATION AND ECONOMY - 1964

Population and Economy studies are helpful in determining the health of the local economy and providing source statistics about the population that are helpful in programming services and facilities. The recommendations in this report were not as concrete as those in a recreation study, for instance; population/economy studies identify large scale problems and make rather generalized statements and recommendations concerning these situations.

The 1964 study stated many of the major problems but made few suggestions as to solutions. Possibly the few recommendations made were designed to solve a number of problems with each implementation. Albemarle has taken definite steps in implementing the specific suggestions made in the study. This is further evidence of the city's commitment to the planning process. The establishment of Stanly Technical Institute will help in curing a lot of the employment problems mentioned. The report suggested that a community college or industrial education center would prove helpful in attracting and training the younger productive male employees. This, in turn, should help provide skilled workers to the local labor market and help in attracting a more diversified mix of industry to Albemarle and Stanly County.

The recent activity of the Industrial Development Commission has already begun attracting diversified types of industry. This type of industry hunting efforts on the local level and total city-county cooperation will in time be a model for similar areas in the state to follow.

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT PLAN - 1965

A significant amount of time was spent preparing the Central Business District (CBD) Plan for Albemarle with some improvements resulting from it. Parking space was a problem in 1965 and remains somewhat of a problem in 1977. There have been changes in the local economy, construction of a mall and shopping center and citizen's growing reliance on their automobiles. This reliance plus the ease of finding a parking place in outlying shopping centers has drawn some business away from downtown. Insufficient off-street parking for people who work downtown is a current major problem affecting the CBD. The appearance of downtown Albemarle has been greatly enhanced through efforts to enforce the sign regulations of the zoning ordinance. Many older and nonconforming signs were replaced through cooperative efforts of the Community Improvement Commission and downtown merchants. There are, however, still some signs that do not enhance the aesthetic quality of the CBD.

There have been a number of offstreet parking spaces created since 1965 in addition to the removal of parking meters downtown. These efforts have helped the situation somewhat. Parking problems in most downtown areas stems from the fact that prospective shoppers will not walk any appreciable distance from their cars to a store. The removal of parking meters may have some influence on downtown employees using shoppers' parking spaces. The Albemarle Police Department, through its traffic control program, has been marking the tires of those cars that abuse free parking.

The recommendations listed under design objectives in the 1965 plan are very broad in nature regarding traffic and pedestrian circulation, providing parking facilities and creating a dynamic downtown. The construction of the new courthouse and subsequent razing of the old courthouse on the square has affected the area and should offer possibilities for further beautifying downtown. The vacant area where the gazebo now stands could and should be developed further and put to more use. This would be a prime spot for various attractions, displays, entertainment, exhibits, classes, contests, concerts or flea markets. Merchants might find this would stimulate more interest

in downtown.

There have been efforts and accomplishments on the part of both the City of Albemarle and merchants to implement at least some of the CBD Plan recommendations. These efforts are still being made.

COMMUNITY APPEARANCE - 1966

The 1966 Community Appearance study for Albemarle was not acted upon significantly until 1972. Full scale endeavors were started with the hiring of a full time employee by the city. Since that time, the city has lost that employee yet the renamed Community Improvement Committee remains very active. This group is responsible for a great deal of the community appearance efforts in Albemarle. Their projects range from downtown signs to coordinating garden club projects. This committee holds regular meetings and functions as a volunteer advisory board of the city. As in other areas of municipal management in Albemarle, the city manager and city council are aware of the works of the committee.

The main area of concern for the committee has been downtown. They have been almost completely successful in bringing about the changes in types of signs. This committee convinced individual merchants of the need for sign alterations or removal, then provided a crane to accomplish this. Again, such success in downtown change has not been found in many other North Carolina cities and towns. When merchants are ready to repaint their storefronts the Community Improvement Committee provides them with a suggested color scheme that is coordinated with an overall color plan for downtown. The committee is now undertaking a project to paint murals on the sides of buildings in addition to continuing landscape work on the square.

The committee is also, has been and still is involved in various city and now countywide appearance projects. These include decorative painting of fire hydrants, securing a farmer's market for downtown, landscaping and flowers around the prison camp entrance, and citywide participation in the state cleanup campaign. The committee is also offering help and advice to the Town of Norwood in its appearance projects.

The continuing efforts on behalf of the city and the Community Improvement Committee are ample evidence of the benefits of the Community Appearance Study.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES PLAN - PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS PROGRAM

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS BUDGET - 1966 - 1967

These reports were completed as elements in a continuing program of comprehensive planning. The two reports are combined here due to their successive and contingent nature.

The Community Facilities Plan was intended to inventory the existing city owned and semi-public facilities as well as public services. From this inventory, deficiencies became apparent and actions were recommended to alleviate them and to provide for future needs.

Although many of the recommendations were not acted upon, this was often due to the unavailability of money rather than poorly conceived plans. The plan was primarily concerned with outlining community needs and not with providing an exact means of financing. The needs were real even if the suggested plans were not implemented.

There are numerous indications of the city's dedication to improving, expanding and constructing new community facilities and services. The recent opening of the new waste treatment plant has doubled the daily capacity for treatment to sixteen million gallons per day. The new plant is a more modern facility with treatment by extended aeration with tertiary sand filters as opposed to the older trickling filter or chemical precipitation. The Stanly County Water and Wastewater Feasibility Study by Moore-Gardner and Associates shows that Albemarle's projected maximum daily demand in 1990 will be 12.6 million gallons per day.

The City's treatment capacity remains adequate as the water plant currently operates at two thirds its capacity of twelve million gallons per day. The plant shuts down when the clear wells are filled, so it does not usually operate twenty-four hours per day. Storage capacity as well as treatment capacity is adequate to handle any future growth.

The Police Department's size has remained essentially the same but has moved to its new location - with more adequate facilities - at the corner of Second Street and West North Street.

Street improvements is a continuing goal of the City of Albemarle. Widening of Carolina Avenue and the development of this bypass system is the

latest of these efforts. The city's success with securing Community Development Block Grants, the administration of those grants and the obvious improvements seen in the target areas is measurable proof of the city's commitment to a better living environment.

Stanly County has, after a long struggle, secured funds and begun preparation of a new airport in the Palestine area. This development, in connection with the waste treatment plant and city-county cooperative efforts on industrial recruiting will enable Albemarle's populace to realize even more community facilities.

The Public Improvements Program and Capital Improvements Budget were completed in 1967. These documents are basic elements in a long range fiscal plan for public capital improvements, acquisitions, and for continuing and expanding necessary city services. Further, a time table for the authorization of bonded indebtedness is presented. The Public Improvements Program uses the findings and recommendations of the Community Facilities Plan which had previously inventoried the physical, social, and governmental services offered the residents of Albemarle. The study then presents a list of specific proposals in a logical sequence throughout the next twenty years. Each improvement or acquisition is categorized according to time of need and is based on anticipated city revenues, population trends, and land development.

The Capital Improvements Budget is the more detailed and implementable of the two studies. The greater level of detail is made attainable by the short range nature of the report. The budget is an actual plan for the first six fiscal years of the larger twenty years covered in the Public Improvements Program. This six year budget presented proposed projects, anticipated costs and methods of financing. Due to the availability of funds, changing methods of financing, a fluctuating economy and shifting priorities, this budget should be reviewed annually if possible and updated at least every five to six years. The Public Improvements Program needs updating every fifteen to twenty years at most.

Albemarle's officials have prepared such an updated Capital Budget. The budget was updated in 1973, five years after the initial preparation. This budget should be formally updated again in 1978. These reports do not

receive the publicity that many other planning documents or activities do but their importance cannot be denied. Recognition of this importance has been given by the City of Albemarle in their use of those plans.

NEIGHBORHOOD ANALYSIS - 1969

The Neighborhood Analysis divided Albemarle into fourteen study areas both inside and outside the city limits. Each neighborhood was analyzed in terms of selected environmental and social factors.

The study presented a very comprehensive appraisal of activities that would improve the blighted areas as well as be influential on causes of blight. There was and still remains an effective campaign being waged against actual neighborhood deterioration and its causes. The most visible evidence of this is Albemarle's Community Development Program that has been funded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. This block grant program is designed to eradicate specifically the problems noted in the Neighborhood Analysis. The analysis did not pinpoint any specific cause for deterioration but did offer realistic suggestions for correcting the various situations. Many other suggestions offered have been actually completed. The establishment of Stanly Technical Institute, preparations for a new airport, and the new courthouse are community-wide projects that show progress in Albemarle's efforts toward better environment. The renewed emphasis on attracting industry is already paying off and will bolster the economic outlook in Albemarle.

The overriding factor that indicates the city's position on the elimination of blight is the aforementioned Community Development Program. The federal requirements and bureaucratic red tape connected with this grant process are staggering. Many cities and towns have started work on getting these grants and become involved in the requirements only to become frustrated and give up. Many elected officials and professionals have decided the rewards of the program are not worth the effort. The determination and skills of officials in Albemarle in successfully obtaining the grants and administering the program exemplify their position on improving the quality of neighborhoods in Albemarle.

Albemarle has recently been notified by the Department of Housing and Urban Development that the city will not receive community development funds in the coming fiscal year. The city should continue to fund as much of the proposed project as possible from local sources.

ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION OF CITY GOVERNMENT - 1971

This report was written for the purpose of analyzing the city's administrative organization and functions, focusing upon existing and potential problems and developing recommendations for improvement. While a very detailed report, only the manner of service delivery was concentrated upon. The report sets out its purpose in the beginning and makes a very important statement not often found in comprehensive planning. The author realized at the outset that his purpose was not to bring about "sweeping change" to the city government or to build an "ideal" city government. Such a pretense may be in part responsible for the implementation of a number of recommendations made in the study.

One of the areas recommended for more specification of powers and duties concerned with the city manager and mayor's functions. The recommendations stated that through recodification of codes and ordinances and re-enactment of the city's charter, the manager's role and the council's role should be described in print. The primary objective being sought through that recommendation was to insure that the manager engaged in administrative actions only while the mayor and council members made policy. This firm delineation of powers and duties still remains unaccomplished. This recommendation presents itself as one that has not been acted upon yet is still valid and should be carried out. This would clear up any gray areas between the two offices' functions.

Other recommendations in the report have been carried out and proven beneficial to the operation of government. The city manager now has an administrative assistant. The city manager remains the Executive Director of the Housing Authority. Operations of finance, purchasing and inspections have been refined with ongoing efforts at better service delivery and operation in each. Definite departments have been established according to recommendations made in the report. The renovation of city hall facilitated many of the locational recommendations made in the report.

Recommendations concerning the planning board's operation have not been acted upon. The planning board continues to function actually as two separate boards - members from inside the city limits and those representing the

extraterritorial area. While the General Statutes permit this, problems occur with regard to quorums needed for planning board action. Further consideration should be given to amending this situation.

City government in Albemarle has obviously benefitted from the action taken on recommendations from this report. An encouraging atmosphere still exists in city hall in that improvement of service delivery is a constant concern of those involved in policy making as well as administration.

HOUSING ELEMENT UPDATE - 1973

This report is a statement of the different aspects of Albemarle's housing problems in 1973 as compared to the initial housing study of 1970. Several objectives were set out in order to solve those problems. A major federal program affecting housing was enacted in 1974 that has had a significant impact on many of the problems mentioned in this report.

Blighted neighborhoods in South Albemarle, availability of housing types and out-migration were listed as the major problems of 1973. Obstacles to the solution of these problems were: Availability of local funds to attack the problems, racial separation of housing types, locational divisions within the black neighborhoods, high interest rates and construction costs, local developers' reluctance to become involved in federally supported housing construction programs, prevalence of low-wage employment and soil conditions which inhibit septic tank use.

Some of the obstacles still exist though housing development continues in Albemarle. As mentioned the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 has taken effect and is being administered with notable success in Albemarle. The city was awarded funds and is progressing with the elimination and/or rehabilitation of substandard housing in South Albemarle. There will also be a daycare facility built to serve this area. Continued federal funding of this program will enable other areas to be improved in the future. Many of the recommended actions in the 1973 study were covered by the purposes and requirements of the Community Development Act. Completion of the Annexation Feasibility study was recommended along with following the suggestions therein. That study found annexation to be extremely expensive to the point of impracticality. High construction costs have increased to the point that buying a house, not necessarily an older one, or a mobile home still remains the only avenue to single family housing for the majority of families in Albemarle.

There will be another housing study update done in fiscal year 77/78 - if funds are forthcoming - that will shed even more light on the situation in Albemarle. The previously mentioned activities of the industrial development corporation and the community development activities taking place in

South Albemarle will definitely prove beneficial to any housing problems.

ANNEXATION FEASIBILITY (1976)

An Annexation Feasibility study was completed for Albemarle in 1976. The possibility of annexing specific areas around the entire existing city limit boundary had been discussed for some time. The feasibility was examined relative to utility extensions and other required/needed services.

There were nine areas under consideration for annexation. A land use survey was done for all areas. Each area was analyzed relative to its conformance with North Carolina's General Statutes along with the anticipated revenue from property taxes. This anticipated revenue was compared with the costs of providing municipal services to each area for both short and long term.

All areas were found to be in compliance with statutory provisions for annexation. The costs for water and sewer service proved to be the decisive factors in the formulation of any time schedule for annexation. In many cases, feasibility studies are a prelude to the actual undertaking of some actions. The city council and administration in Albemarle has shown good judgement in their reluctance to begin annexation until a more feasible financial plan can be worked out.

THE LAND DEVELOPMENT PLAN AND LAND USE CONTROLS (1971)

The Land Development Plan can (and should) be the most important document in the planning library. Desirable land use patterns outlined in this report form the basis for growth management through zoning and subdivision regulations, which in turn have the greatest impact on the general public. By analyzing local demographic, economic, and topographic data, the LDP can reveal growth trends which could alert the city to the need for and location of expanded services. In short, by attempting to depict the future shape and extent of the city, the LDP is the keystone in the comprehensive planning program.

To be effective as a means of achieving desired land uses, the LDP must be actively used as a guideline for official city policy. Serving this function requires the incorporation of a variety of conflicting viewpoints into one coherent presentation. Various interest groups should be consulted during the plan preparation, and when completed, the plan together with its ramifications should be presented to the public. The Land Development Plan Revision (1971) followed this procedure and consequently reflects the input of many people. This document will also be reviewed in the coming year to reflect the requirements of the Department of Housing and Urban Development relative to continuing program grant assistance.

The list of recommended implementation actions that were programmed have been adhered to with few exceptions. Recommendations include updating previous planning studies which has been completed, continued perseverance toward the completion of parts of the thoroughfare plan which has been accomplished, expansion of sewage treatment facilities which has been done, completion of an annexation feasibility study which has been finished and numerous other continuing projects.

This revision of the Land Development Plan has been used as a guideline by the city and will be further refined in the coming year. A map of the revised LDP should be displayed in the city council chambers as well as copies of the text of that plan.

A survey of the Planning Board's minutes from January 14, 1964 through February 7, 1977 shows a great deal of time spent on requests for rezoning.

A total of 204 separate requests were handled during the 13 year period. One hundred twenty three (123) of those requests involved rezoning to allow some type of business or commercial land use. The Planning Board recommended approval for 91 of those 123.

The Planning Board's minutes are not always clear as to the location of the request or the amount of land to be rezoned. However, many entries do give locations and there is a significant number of changes requested for Highway 52 as well as Highway 24-27 Bypass. There have been approximately 25 requests for rezoning on Highway 52 and 22 requests for changes on Highway 24-27. Both of these areas are becoming more and more congested as the strip commercial development continues. The Planning Board and Council should consider their past records of rezoning for such development and decide if they want the type traffic problems that are generated by strip commercial land use. A nearby example of such a consequence can be found on East and West Innes Street in Salisbury.

Judging from the number of rezoning requests handled by the planning board and city council since 1964, anything that would make decisions on such requests easier should certainly be available and used.

Land use controls require special attention in a planning program evaluation for several reasons. First, these controls derive their authority from the North Carolina General Statutes and are the key factors in implementing any plans conceived by the local government. The desired land use patterns presented in the Land Development Plan Revision would be virtually unattainable if the Zoning Ordinance did not provide the means of requiring specific land use. Likewise, the Subdivision Regulations provide the means of insuring proper and safe subdivision and development of land. The administration of Subdivision Regulations in Albemarle has proven effective. The ordinance should be reviewed and amended to reflect specific changes such as the General Assembly's change in exemptions from subdivision regulations and possibly include a provision for an abbreviated plat approval process. The latter would save time and expense for the city as well as developers.

Albemarle's zoning ordinance was revised and a new map prepared in 1971. The Planning Board and City Council have done an admirable job in implementing this ordinance though there could still be improvements made. The city should

consider reviewing the growth of commercial land use and the corresponding number of requests for rezoning. In depth review would possibly find no need for six different commercial zoning classifications in Albemarle's geographic planning area. The coordination and communication between planning board and city council remains excellent. The attendance of the city manager at these meetings facilitates this. A step further might be taken in having one or more members of the planning board attend city council meetings and vice versa for council members. Continued separate voting practices for planning board members concerning extraterritorial matters will present some degree of difficulty.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned throughout this report, Albemarle's planning program has been administered in an enviable fashion. The city's planning area will continue to develop as will the other communities in Stanly County. The attraction of industry to the area by the joint city-county recruitment effort will be a major factor in this area. Some consideration should be given to possibly consolidating the planning programs of Stanly County and Albemarle. This would not mean one planning board for the entire area but rather a department of planning that would administer both. The county now has a fulltime resident planner and use of his staff and facilities could lessen the "planning" load on the city manager's staff. An alternative solution might be a department of Community Development to oversee the planning activities for Albemarle as well as continuing activities in housing rehabilitation.

In order for Albemarle's comprehensive planning program to be productive, there should be a schedule of work elements to be performed. There are a number of studies and plans that have been completed in the past that should be updated to reflect changing growth patterns and trends throughout the planning area. The Land Development Plan and Capital Budget have each been revised once and will need to be again if these are to be of any use at all to the city. The Capital Budget, by nature, is a specific six year plan for certain projects and it must be reviewed and revised to reflect new projects as well as deleting those that have been completed. The last budget update was performed in 1973. The Capital Budget should be updated again in fiscal year 78-79.

The Land Development Plan Revision should be reconsidered in FY 78-79. Major accomplishments in the Thoroughfare Plan for Albemarle will certainly affect the land use in those areas. There needs to be more reliance on the city's adopted land development plans in the decisions affecting zoning and land use. The monthly list of rezoning requests should not even be considered without the use of the Land Development Plan. If there is no commitment made to use the plan, then time and money should not be expended in preparing a new one.

Land use controls should be revised to include some of the newer practices in subdivision control and possibly some deletions in zoning classifications. These ordinances should be revised to coincide with the land development plan as implementation tools.

As a survey of land development around Albemarle will show, there are some areas that do not have access to nearby recreation facilities. A schedule for development of park facilities in fast growing areas such as northeast Albemarle should be included in a recreation plan for the city.

A recent newspaper article reported that property tax valuation did not rise accordingly in the downtown area with the recent revaluation. The reason was the number of vacant buildings in the area. There should be a renewed effort to stimulate building renovation and overall appearance in the central business district through landscape architecture as well as efforts currently being carried on by the Community Improvement Commission. Without a concentrated renewal shoppers will continue to patronize more attractive and accessible malls and the downtown tax base will continue to decline.

TIMETABLE

FISCAL YEAR 77-78

- Land Development Plan Certification
- Housing Study/Certification
- Central Business District Appearance Program

FISCAL YEAR 78-79

- Land Development Plan Revision
- Capital Budget Update
- Zoning Ordinance Revision
- Subdivision Regulation Revision
- Recreation Plan

FISCAL YEAR 79-80

- City-County Planning Consolidation Feasibility

As stated previously, many efforts made in the name of planning in Albemarle are exemplary and hopefully will be continued. Albemarle has had and continues to have sound and responsive leadership at the legislative (City Council) and executive (City Manager) levels. Participation by advisory boards and cooperative efforts between the city and county are steadily increasing. The City Manager's professionalism and leadership is reflected in his staff's efficiency and Albemarle's continued dedication to continuation of a sound planning program. This, combined with the support and commitment of the Council, has resulted in, overall, meaningful long term planning implementation.

